

Defense industry shields St. Mary's

by JASON BABCOCK, Staff writer

As the nation's economy struggled, household income in St. Mary's County rose at the fourth highest rate in the United States between 2007 and 2010, the county commissioners were told Tuesday.

From 2007, median household income went from \$73,663 to \$88,444 in 2010, an increase of 20.1 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Monongalia County, W.Va. was No. 1 in income growth, which was attributed to the presence of West Virginia University.

"We're a defense-related town," said Bob Schaller, director of the St. Mary's County Department of Economic and Community Development.

Median household incomes at the state and federal level have been on the decline in recent years.

The poverty rate in St. Mary's is around 6 percent, compared to the national rate of 15.1 percent 46.2 million people.

While the rate in St. Mary's is low among Maryland jurisdictions, the St. Mary's County Department of Social Services is handling a record number of caseloads, Schaller told the commissioners said, because of the sheer number of people in this, the fastest-growing county in Maryland.

The unemployment rate in August this year for St. Mary's was 6.5 percent, compared to 7.4

percent in Maryland and Baltimore city's 11.1 percent.

Southern Maryland led the state in the fastest growth from 2000 to 2010, the Census reported, and St. Mary's County grew the fastest at 22 percent, an increase of almost 19,000 new people, the largest increase of bodies in a single decade in the county's long history, Schaller said.

Three out of every five new people were people moving to the area, he said.

And what drives that growth? Jobs, Schaller said. Jobs at Patuxent River Naval Air Station. The base accounts for 22,423 jobs in total between contractors, civil servants and military.

Those working for Pax River are making good money, the figures indicate. The average weekly wage of someone in the federal government or professional business service is \$1,661 in St. Mary's. For all other industries, the average weekly wage is \$715.

The total average weekly wage is \$1,127, the second highest in the state behind Montgomery County, Schaller said.

Commissioner Todd Morgan (R) said other counties in the state with military bases show the same disparities between those who work in military-related jobs and other industries.

"Because we're smaller, it's much more evident here," Schaller said.

Of the overall good state of the local economy, Commissioner Larry Jarboe (R) said, "The job is let's keep it that way."

St. Mary's median income growth fourth-highest in nation

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